

2013

Legal Tender: Love and Legitimacy in the East German Cultural Imagination

Evan M. Torner

University of Massachusetts - Amherst, etorner@german.umass.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/edge>

Recommended Citation

Torner, Evan M. (2013) "Legal Tender: Love and Legitimacy in the East German Cultural Imagination," *EDGE - A Graduate Journal for German and Scandinavian Studies*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/edge/vol3/iss1/2>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in EDGE - A Graduate Journal for German and Scandinavian Studies by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

***Legal Tender: Love and Legitimacy in the East German Cultural Imagination.* By John Griffith Urang.** Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010. 224 pp. \$35 /22.95 £ Softcover. ISBN: 978-0-8014-7653-2.

There are, in all seriousness, not enough German Studies books about love.¹ Not only does love drive most fictional plot lines in literature and film, but it also directly addresses a society's values and fears found within our most intimate relations. Fictional acts of love strengthen one symbolic order or another, and the libidinal economies underlying any given society take shape in the texts it produces. Or in the words of John Griffith Urang, Assistant Professor of Humanities & Arts, Worcester Polytechnic Institute: "The love plot offers an enticingly simple solution to gaps or weaknesses in the narrative's ideological infrastructure" (6). Find the anxieties at stake in a romance narrative, and you will likely find key assumptions on which a culture rests.

Urang's highly readable monograph *Legal Tender: Love and Legitimacy in the East German Cultural Imagination* analyzes the topic of romance in East German film and literature against the shifting terms of GDR ideology. Whereas Marxist-Leninist doctrine maintained socialist realism as the basis for judging a work of art's merit, the exchanges between two fictive lovers in GDR fiction often proved anything but realistic. The state forcefully argued against "illusionism" and romantic notions of reality in its public rhetoric, all while taking for granted the notion of weirdly vertiginous love between young people in the genre fiction that it promoted. This inherent contradiction was apparent to most at the time. For example, the satirical DEFA film short "Eine Liebesgeschichte" (1953) by Richard Groschopp and Günter Kunert depicts two GDR cultural functionaries in dark glasses eagerly listening to a fresh-faced screenwriter whose script is about a young couple in love in a forest glade. To satisfy the functionaries' political mandates, the screenwriter radically changes the script to be about a love forged between a young steelworker and tractor-driver committed to an emancipated, socialist relationship. As the writer reads these Stalinist clichés aloud, the functionaries look outside their window—toward "reality," so to speak—at a young couple in love in a forest glade. Through this film, Groschopp and Kunert directly lampoon the functionaries' attempts to mediate reality, while at the same time problematically invoke romance clichés (i.e., lovers in a glade) to mirror the GDR *Alltag*.

Why was this the case? Urang claims that the GDR cultural apparatus actively distinguished its own vision of "wahre Liebe" from West Germany's "Liebesware" through the unique deployment of commodities as objects of desire. Unfettered access to consumer goods from the West would have to be replaced with feelings of dignity, kinship and authenticity. Yet in their attempts to achieve these sentiments in their texts, the GDR artists discussed in the book often found themselves unconsciously supporting typical Western European romance topoi that rendered incoherent any and all independent socialist ideas of romance in development.

¹ A few scattered monographs do exist, mostly of material stretching from the medieval era to 1945, but rarely venturing past that pivotal year. Exemplary among these studies are: Wolfgang Freese, *Mystischer Moment und reflektierte Dauer: zur epischen Funktion der Liebe im modernen deutschen Roman* (Göppingen: A. Kümmerle, 1969); Sara Friedrichsmeyer, *The Androgyne in Early German Romanticism: Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis and the Metaphysics of Love* (New York: Peter Lang, 1983). Inspiring recent articles on the topic include: Claude von Haas, "Amour allemand: Figurationen 'deutscher' Liebe in der Literatur des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts." *Jahrbuch für Internationale Germanistik* 43.1 (2011): 131–156; Brent O. Peterson, "Imagining Integration: Why Fictional, Inter-Ethnic Marriages Matter." *German Studies Review* 34.3 (October 2011): 511–528.

Nevertheless, East Germany did develop a fetishistic idea of the commodity centered on personal biographies, rather than perceptions of social status or consumer quality, as in capitalist countries. It is the tension between these two commodifying ideals—love as a gateway to plentitude and pride (but also traditional values), or love as a gateway to humility and a kind of personal utopia—that constitutes the basis for a surprising number of GDR texts, from Gerdi Tetzner’s suffocating *Karen W.* to post-Wende novels such as Wolfgang Hilbig’s *Ich*. Urang’s monograph has to thus hit multiple elusive targets, which it does with relative ease.

As an adaptation of Urang’s eponymous 2006 University of Chicago dissertation, *Legal Tender* is divided into the standard five chronologically ordered chapters with additional introduction and conclusion. The methodology section in Chapter One places much emphasis on the thought of Niklas Luhmann, the late cultural sociologist whose work on systems theory in the 1980s and 90s has paved the way for a still-emergent post-identity movement in our own field.² Specifically, Urang uses Luhmann’s *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy* to address issues of power and control raised by love, especially when love is seen as a mere communicative act within prescribed societal systems rather than a transcendental force. The systems theory helps him explain why East German love stories consistently tended toward the justification of unfavorable exchange between two characters through romance plots: Rita choosing to stay in the East despite her health problems in Christa Wolf’s *Der geteilte Himmel*, or the petit-bourgeois Gottfried Kinkel counter-intuitively marrying radical revolutionary Johanna Mockel in Günter de Bruyn’s *Buridans Esel*. What these protagonists share is a willingness to enter into bad economic bargains for the sake of some ambiguous “higher cause” reinforced by social systems. David Bathrick has argued that such character decisions stemmed from ideological rubrics of antifascism and socialism painted with a relatively broad brush.³ Urang’s Luhmann-inspired analysis advances Bathrick’s work, in that he has teased out specific symbolic economies produced by fundamental tensions between the GDR’s unsustainable economic base and the political rhetoric it espoused. These tensions forced the creation of what Urang calls a “socialist commodity fetish” (9), or the SED party’s attempted enchantment of the conditions of an object’s production. Yet the historical result appeared to be, according to Urang, the unintentional enrichment of “East German commodities by the circumstances of their distribution” (199). The sheer peculiarity of systems of exchange under SED-led socialism rendered commodities—and love itself as a commodity—unique and memorable in their own right.

Legal Tender briskly churns through readings of various better and lesser-known love stories from the 1950s through the early 2000s (with the obligatory analysis of *Das Leben der Anderen*, 2006). Chapter Two deals with love in post-Stalinist DEFA cinema. The socialist commodity fetish first becomes visible in DEFA films such as *Eine Berliner Romanze* (1956) and *Der Kinnhaken* (1962), in that only the state’s blessing can justify commodity consumption or sustainable love relationships, lest one otherwise fall into the prostitution relations of West Germany. Chapter Three deals with the literature of the early 1960s. The uniquely East German genre of the *Ankunftsroman*—namely Brigitte Reimann’s *Ankunft im Alltag* and Karl-Heinz Jakobs’s *Beschreibung eines Sommers*—Urang sees as an attempt to re-focus relationship value

² Proponents of Luhmann in German studies include Todd Cesaratto, Robert C. Holub, and Peter Gilgen, among others.

³ David Bathrick, *The Powers of Speech: The Politics of Culture in the GDR* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

on production over consumption; it's not what your relationship can buy, but on what spirit of labor that relationship rests. Urang describes this literature of the 1960s, as Henning Wrage does,⁴ as something of an experiment that would ultimately prove unsustainable beyond 1966. The post-*Aufbau* era through the 1970s saw the notable growth of a class rift between the intellectuals and the workers, which was now the new division that romance and commodities had to bridge behind the Wall. Urang then turns in Chapter Four to the late GDR period of 1975–1989 to discuss the polemical gender politics that emerged from the early 1970s and, via stories such as those by Irmtraud Morgner, the retreat from public-approved heterosexual romance in favor of diverse “private utopias” beyond GDR binaries. Chapter Five raises the issue of surveillance in GDR fiction during the late 1980s and then after the *Wende*, and the state's use of romance to acculturate GDR citizens into being watched and to watch others. Urang concludes by reiterating the qualitative difference of the socialist commodity fetishism and the forty-year usage of diverse romance fiction to overcome material disillusionment of the GDR populace.

Whereas many studies of East German literature ponderously dwell on ideology and the intricacies of Cold War history, Urang's text moves with agility between the historical and the personal, between fictional relationships and the libidinal economy that they support, between the facts of Cold War consumption and production and their national imaginaries enacted through characters and drama. He successfully mobilizes the symbolic worlds of prospective fictional couples to depict the larger social system that constrains their decisions. A minor critique could be made of the volume's slimness: Urang must cover a lot of ground in little space, such that the historical periods he discusses cannot properly breathe through other texts and alternative readings. Egon Günther's DEFA melodrama *Der Dritte* (1972), for example, might have united Urang's “gender trouble” argument with his somewhat weaker argument about Stasi surveillance. At telling moments in *Der Dritte*, the protagonist Margit communicates that she is aware of society's surveillance of her activities as she makes the decision to marry Hrdlitschka, a potential Stasi cipher, based on her past two marriages to a worker and an artist respectively. Naturally, future scholars can help interrogate Urang's argument and provide other counter-examples from the rich wellspring of the East German cultural heritage. Nevertheless, *Legal Tender* already stands as a landmark amidst the recent wave of ambitious interpretations of GDR media and deserves a read by any Germanist interested in how to approach the social function of love, romance and commodities.

Evan Torner
University of Massachusetts Amherst

⁴ Henning Wrage, *Die Zeit der Kunst: Literatur, Film und Fernsehen in der DDR der 1960er Jahre* (München: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2009).